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Statement of purpose

Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes Leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply “carrying on the fight,” but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

The *Platypus Review* is motivated by its sense that the Left is disoriented. We seek to be a forum among a variety of tendencies and approaches on the Left—not out of a concern with inclusion for its own sake, but rather to provoke disagreement and to open shared goals as sites of contestation. In this way, the recriminations and accusations arising from political disputes of the past may be harnessed to the project of clarifying the object of Leftist critique.

The *Platypus Review* hopes to create and sustain a space for interrogating and clarifying positions and orientations currently represented on the Left, a space in which questions may be raised and discussions pursued that would not otherwise take place. As long as submissions exhibit a genuine commitment to this project, all kinds of content will be considered for publication.

Submission guidelines

Articles will typically range in length from 750–4,500 words, but longer pieces will be considered. Please send article submissions and inquiries about this project to editor.platypusreview@gmail.com. All submissions should conform to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

The *Platypus Review* is funded by:

Phedias Christodoulides
Dalhousie Student Union
Loyola University of Chicago
The New School
New York University
Northwestern University
The Platypus Affiliated Society
School of the Art Institute of Chicago Student Government
The University of Chicago Student Government
The University of Illinois at Chicago

About the Platypus Affiliated Society

The Platypus Affiliated Society, established in December 2006, organizes reading groups, public fora, research and journalism focused on problems and tasks inherited from the “Old” (1920s–30s), “New” (1960s–70s) and post-political (1980s–90s) Left for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.



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William Blake, "God Judging Adam" (ca. 1795)

agents who game the legal system that they themselves create, in which their own sophistry prevails. But this violates what is supposed to be the spirit of the laws. The legislative representatives judge the will of the people in writing the law, the executives interpret the law and make decisions about enforcing it or not; and the judicial branch judges whether the execution of the law accords with rights — and indeed whether the laws themselves are right: they both review the law itself as well as its execution. All are elected — all are understood to be political in nature, namely, that they are functions of constituting the *polis* in action. The law does not have divine but only human status: provisional, fallible, revisable, imperfect — and hence fundamentally unjust. In a criminal trial, justice is not to be achieved but is only at best a by-product of the application of the law. It is the justice in the application of the law that is at issue, not justice for the crime, which is impossible — as God says, "Vengeance is Mine."

only those same bureaucrats and corporate that the public cannot understand them, but bureaucrats — laws so elaborate and complex but corporate lobbyists and government representatives themselves or their staff, advanced capitalism? Not the legislative But who actually writes the laws in interminably entrenched in office. supposed to be, though in practice most serve replaced — or at least hypothetically are and why representatives are constantly them: this is why they are constantly revised, on whether the laws actually represent the people are supposed to continually decide is representative and not direct democracy, legislature is composed of representatives and balances in divided government, the in the separation of powers of checks the law will be applied, if at all. interpret the law. All decide whether and how And the people are in the jury of your peers. All prosecutor. The judicial branch in the judge. elected to enforce the law is present in the

Critics of Trump's prosecution are correct that it is a Stalinist Berla-style "show me the man and I will find the crime" targeting not of an offense but a person whose guilt is presumed. This is contrary to the presumption of innocence that favors the rights of the accused — including the right not to be investigated, let alone charged, at all. Who will defend such rights? The people. — Certainly not the state.

In the U.S., the trial favors the defendant — not so elsewhere, where it favors the state. When found not guilty before the law, a defendant is not thus found to be innocent — which can never be proved — but merely not culpable in the eyes of the state: the state is prevented from punishing you, but it does not find that you did no wrong. This is why a defendant who is not found guilty in criminal court can still be sued civilly and subject to civil judgment. Courts do not decide morality but only law — legal liability.

A jury votes on whether the state is permitted to violate your rights. That is democracy. This is why a jury can say, regardless of whether the state has proved its case beyond a reasonable doubt or not, that you are not to be held guilty before the law, even if you did indeed do the crime of which you are accused.

We don't like that. But this is what freedom requires. The law is not absolute. Neither do facts amount to judgments. This is why factual innocence is not a legal defense in appeal of a conviction. If the law has been followed, then the facts are immaterial, for the people have decided to hold you accountable anyway.

But you can always be pardoned. The law and the people can convict you, and you can still be relieved of responsibility. The chief executive can decide otherwise. Your rights even as a guilty person can be vindicated ultimately. In a criminal trial are present the three branches of government in the U.S. about — it is a democratic republic, even if not simply a democracy. The executive branch

your rights — of everyone's rights.

state that enforces it are inherent violations of liberty and the pursuit of happiness will not be respected. It is understood that the law and the responsible for it: in this case, the rights to life, of the people, who are thus shown to be an injustice will be allowed by representatives right, so to speak, to violate your rights, and criminal trials: to prove that the state has the and hence injustice. This is indeed the point of not automatic — gives it an air of arbitrariness and decision involved in prosecution — that it is serve the ends of justice. That there is a choice discretion means that a choice not to do so can you can violate your rights. Prosecutorial intent and deliberately did wrong, prosecuting you are accused — even if you had criminal you are indeed guilty of the crime with which includes the right not to be prosecuted even if democracy is that rights come before the law. Even those proven guilty have rights, and that And it is injustice. The idea of liberal same untested waters of injustice.

sued or prosecuted this way would be in the President has been tried previously. Anyone is not because he was once President and no "unprecedented applications of the law." This one — are using "novel legal theories" and against Trump — literally every single All the criminal charges and civil lawsuits they have lied about Trump.

in the right, then there is no need to lie. And Trump has been wrongly accused. If you are accused. So does America more broadly. And

I IDENTIFY STRONGLY WITH the wrongly Presented on April 5, 2024, at the opening plenary panel discussion on "Liberal democracy in crisis?" of the Platypus Affiliated Society's 15th Annual International Convention, with Jordan De Anda (For the People), Howie Hawkins (U.S. Green Party), Ralph Leonard (writer at Unherd, Aereo, et al.) and Matt McManus (author of The Political Theory of Liberal Socialism).'

Why not Trump, again?

Chris Cutrone

Beyond Bonapartism

Breaking statephobic thought taboos

Benjamin M. Studebaker

AT THE PLATYPUS European Conference, I suggested that there is a modern theory of crisis that is no longer fit for purpose.¹ It belongs to modern political theory in general. It is not exclusively Marxist. You'll find it in Lenin and Adorno, but also in Jürgen Habermas and Reinhart Koselleck. Indeed, you'll even find it in Robert Dahl, if you know where to look.² I'm working on a book about all this, and I don't want to spoil it for you. But that book — *Legitimacy in Liberal Democracies* — won't be able to say certain things that I believe you need to hear. It certainly won't be able to say these things in the way I believe you need to hear them.

You see, if my critique of the modern theory of crisis is right, this has implications for you. Insofar as you are a Marxist, it changes what you ought to be doing with your life. Academic books can no longer be written principally for Marxists, because there aren't enough of you around anymore to buy them. But I do want to give you some advice. So, members of Platypus, I've written this just for you. Sometimes I do this sort of thing. The pieces I write for *Isonomia* are for them; this one is for you.

The modern theory of crisis supposes that society can be organized in such a way that it can meaningfully challenge the state. In Marxist theories, the focus is on the party. But in non-Marxist socialism and liberalism, you'll see other organizations given the same task. Alone or in combination, the trade unions, the churches, the guilds, and the salons have been assigned this role. More recently, you'll see abstract references to "community organizers" or "social movements." In these theories it's less clear who is meant to do the work, but it is the same work that is to be done — society is to be organized for the purposes of challenging the state.

Depending on what sort of modernist you are, the challenge to the state is meant to produce reform, revolution, or some synthesis of the two. The state must make concessions to society, it must be overcome by society, it must make concessions that lead to its overcoming, or it must be overcome in a way that leads to the making of concessions. Marxists have traditionally insisted this process must terminate in the state's overcoming.³ Anarchists agree that the state must be overcome, but Marxists think this

overcoming requires the dictatorship of the proletariat, while anarchists entertain other ways of reaching this goal. Social democrats do not want to overcome the bourgeois state; they want concessions from it. Democratic socialists act like social democrats but ostensibly for Marxist or anarchist reasons. You members of Platypus have read all of this stuff and are well-versed in it. You just need me to explain enough of it to demonstrate my awareness.

The historical evidence for the modern theory of crisis lies in the bourgeois revolutions, in 1776 and 1789. It clearly used to be possible to organize society in such a way that you could get this kind of confrontation. The people who developed the modern theory were not stupid; they were responding to their situations intelligently. The modern theory was very effective for bourgeois purposes. You certainly could use it to overcome a traditional monarchy and replace it with the modern state. But modern theorists suppose it can also be used against the modern state itself. The modern state is not like the *ancien régime*. It does not produce the kind of society a degenerating traditional monarchy produces. As the modern state consolidated, developed, and then began to degenerate in its own, unique way, the modern theory of crisis became ever more estranged from the kind of crisis that actually takes place in modern states.

The kingdom of France

Imagine 18th century France.⁴ You have an absolutist monarchy that is at once enormously repressive and yet at the same time increasingly incapable of repression. As power concentrates around the king, the organs of the state that traditionally mediated the king and his subjects — the nobility and the church — degenerate and lose effectiveness. The king's power is strengthened, but these other essential parts of the state wither away. So, the subjects confront the center of power in an unmediated way. This produces a uniform subjectivity. It unites society around the conviction that the king must be confronted. The stronger the king becomes, and the weaker the nobles and the priests, the clearer it is to the subjects that they must confront the king.

At the start of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954), when the Hobbits are in the Shire, and they

look in the direction of Mordor, what do they see? They see forests, villages, the realms of elves, men, and dwarves. There are all sorts of beautiful things between them and Mordor; there is no need to worry. But what happens when the Hobbits peek their heads into Mordor and look at the great eye?⁵ Their purpose becomes clear. They must put aside whatever differences they have and do what is necessary to overcome Sauron. In the Shire, it is necessary for Gandalf to force the Hobbits to go on the journey. But when they see Mordor for themselves, they no longer need to be told what to do. They organize themselves for what very clearly must be done.⁶

Moderns think the state presides over free society, in which they might possibly organize for revolution or reform. But the kind of society that can actually be organized for revolution is not a free society. It is a society that is unfree and conscious of its unfreedom. A degenerating monarchy is much better at producing this kind of society. It is, quite frankly, the one thing that degenerating monarchies do very well.⁷

Modern states outcompete traditional monarchies by finding new ways of mediating between the state and the subject. These new forms of mediation reinstate the confusion that prevailed in the heyday of the traditional monarchies. When most people picture the state, they do not see a king, alone, atop a foreboding tower of doom. They see the democratic procedures and the multilayered bureaucracy they instantiate. They see the civil society organizations themselves. Some try to participate in unions and political parties, thinking they allow them to organize against the state, but they discover too late that these organizations are themselves now playing the mediating roles that the nobles and the priests used to play. The very places to which one once went to make the revolution are now where the confusion has reached its highest level of intensity.

In this web of mediation, one has no idea what to do, which way to go. Worse, one and one's would-be comrades all develop different opinions, disagreeing on which organizations are emancipatory and which have been co-opted. When they do join the same organization, they can't agree on what it should do, what tactics it should adopt. Whenever one tries to confront any particular capitalist politician, that politician tells them that they, the politician, are not the true face of the state. The princess is in some other castle.

In truth, under the modern state there is no longer a single princess, no great eye, and so even if one could unite to confront "the state," one would only succeed in confronting some part of it. When the state cannot be summed up in "*L'état c'est moi*,"⁸ attempts to confront the state often serve to strengthen one part of the state against another. Seemingly "radical" movements facilitate the state's consolidation. Savvy political actors use these movements to advance their own careers, while most people are increasingly confused and frustrated.

This very clearly happened in the traditional monarchies, back in the day. Is there not enough food in the village? Well, whose fault is that? Is it the king's fault? Maybe — but maybe it is the fault of the church. Or perhaps it is the fault of the regional duke, or the local count. Maybe it's the bishop's fault, or maybe the fault lies with the parish priest. The human brain cannot make sense of all this. Fuck it. Let's blame that black rat over there.⁹ It looks upsetting. Maybe it's evil?

There's a film called *The* (1971), in which Cardinal Richelieu is looking to increase the power of the monarchy.¹⁰ To do this, he wants to pull down the walls of the French cities, so that they cannot rebel effectively. In Loudun, there is a priest who refuses to go along with this. The priest is popular and friendly with the king. So, the cardinal contrives to destroy this priest by having a group of nuns accuse him of bewitching them. The legal process degenerates into an absurd show trial, in which "experts" make pseudoscientific arguments. Eventually, the priest is executed and the walls are pulled down. You might think this film depicts medieval subjects who need to be enlightened, and in one sense it does. But it also depicts elites who are very aware of what they are doing. Premodern elites knew how to make their political systems work. They created gaps in consciousness between themselves and their subjects and they exploited these gaps self-consciously.¹¹

The trouble with traditional monarchies was not that the elites did not understand how they worked. The trouble is that the layers of mediation created divisions within the state itself. Mediation is necessary to keep the subjects confused about what's going on, but it also creates conflict within the state, between the church and the monarchy, between the nobility and the church, and

between the monarchy and the nobility. These conflicts are highly functional when you are trying to keep the peasants confused, but they can lead to civil conflict. Internal divisions can be exploited by rival states. Foreign states can choose sides within these divisions. They can use moments of internal weakness to invade.

Concentrating power around the monarchy reduces civil conflict and increases the competitiveness of the state. By centralizing, France became more stable and more able to brush off its rivals. It could eject the English; it could invade Italy. It could even dream of uniting with Spain. But this came at a cost to the French state's capacity to legitimate itself internally. France ate itself internally so as to overcome its external foes. In the course of overcoming other states, the French state lost control of French society.

American democracy is not degenerating in that kind of way. Instead of destroying the mediators, the American political system is hard at work proliferating them. It creates so many mediators that both the state and society are now riven with internal conflicts. There is now so much mediation that even the rulers themselves are increasingly confused about how to make the state operate. Among the elites, there is a lower level of consciousness of this now than there was in antiquity or in the Middle Ages.

After Rousseau

You need wisdom to operate a state that features a lot of mediation. You need political virtues. The modern state was designed to operate in commercial society, in a society where most people are too busy with their private business to develop a fully political consciousness. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato ranks different sorts of people by their level of consciousness of the good.¹² At the top, there's the philosopher, who loves the good in itself, for its own sake. Then you have kings, who are concerned with the good of the whole realm. Then there are the statesmen, who are concerned with the public good, but also with their political careers, along with the householders and financiers who are concerned with the good of their houses, but not of the whole city.¹³

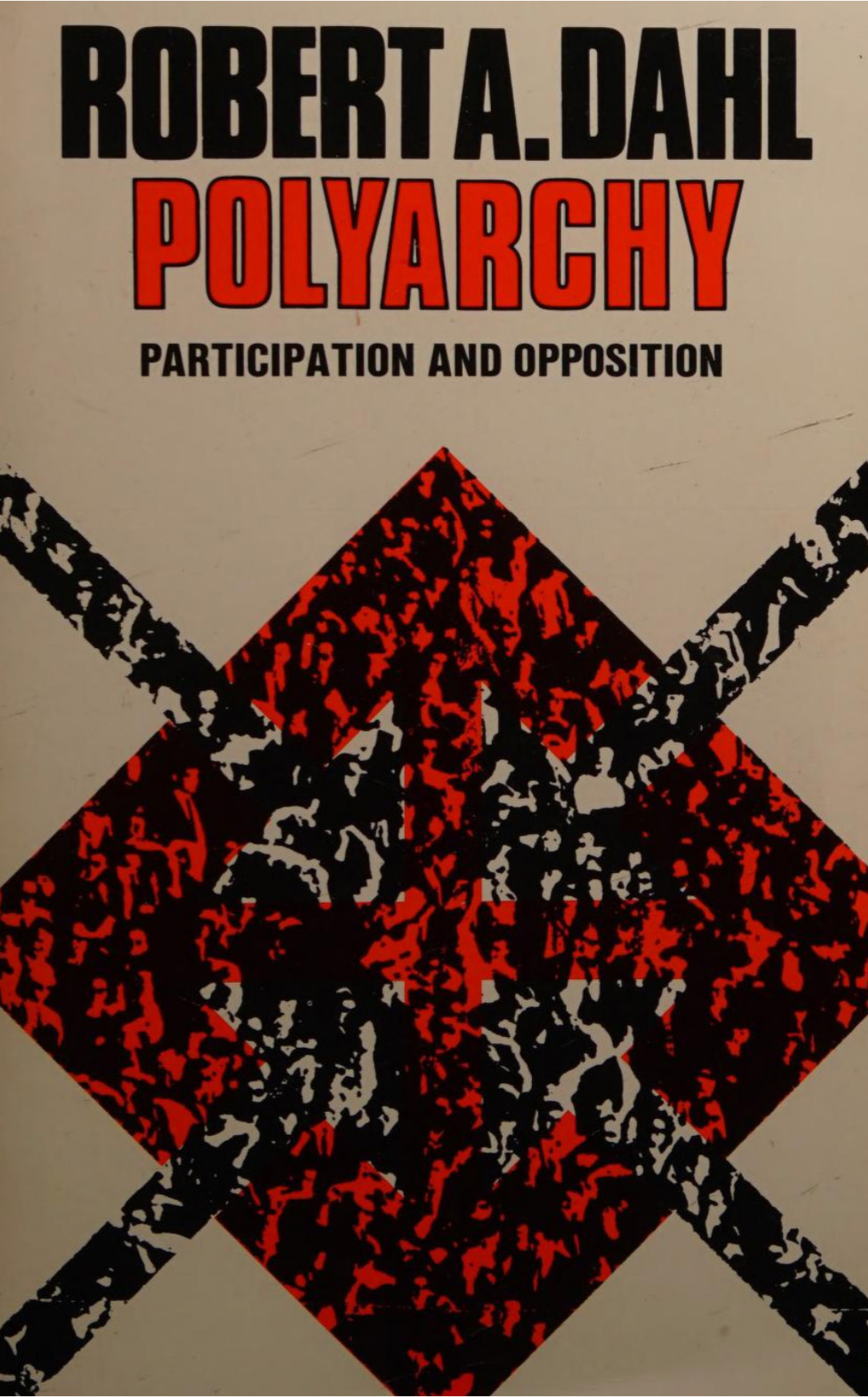
It is very difficult to create people who can be philosophers or kings, who are in position to reach beyond their particular positions and grasp the universal. But for Plato, you must try to generate them, because a city that is run by the householders degenerates into an oligarchy, then a democracy, and finally a tyranny. The householders do not operate at a high enough level of consciousness to maintain the polity in the form in which they receive it.

In the 18th century, when the French state was centralizing, you did not need to be a philosopher or a king to grasp the situation. You could be a Hobbit. It became possible to imagine a form of polity in which a society of householders manages itself without much need for special bodies of armed men. Some of these images were pastoral and agrarian, like Rousseau's. Other images were more overtly commercial and maritime, like those of Adam Smith.

But by the time of Benjamin Constant, it was already beginning to be clear that if there were a moment when this was possible, that moment had passed. It is for this reason that Constant argues that the modern state will operate by reducing the need for the citizens to be politically involved. It will not produce fully conscious subjects, but new forms of mediation that make this lack of consciousness functional. It will bestow the highest level of consciousness it can produce with the name "freedom," but this will be the freedom of the bourgeois householder. Tocqueville celebrates the success of this in the United States. Somehow, the Americans found a way to replace the nobility and the church with new forms of mediation. This is what is exciting about American democracy for the 19th-century French liberal, who is now concerned not just with overcoming kings, but with generating a new kind of French state that can yield stability and order.

Tocqueville nonetheless worried that eventually the Americans would destroy their mediating structures, that eventually the federal state would become like the French kings, and history would repeat itself. Conservative Americans love Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* (1835) in large part because they love these warnings. But their fear that the United States will become the *ancien régime* is misplaced. For while the federal government in the United States has grown stronger over the years, it has also generated even more forms of mediation. It has privatized mediation, relying on corporations like Disney and Tesla to keep its citizens dreaming about alternate worlds and exciting futures.

This has created a federal state that is more powerful but also more divided against itself



Cover of Robert A. Dahl, *Polyarchy* (1972)



From *The Devils* (1971)

than any other state in human history. Its enormous theoretical capacities are constantly thwarted by the reality of its internal divisions. These capacities appear again and again to new generations of Americans as something they might somehow find a way to wield. But each generation is caught in the web of mediation. For a while, there is some futile struggling, but eventually, political energy is exhausted and they make peace with the fact that they are stuck in a new place.

Insofar as they remain with us, the Marxists are quick to point out that American democracy is a trap. They are right to do so. But if they think that the 18th century in France revealed to us a truth to which we can “RETVRN,” they have not grasped history. The image of a united society overcoming the state was only ever briefly appropriate. Its appropriateness has been in continuous decline for over two centuries. Rousseau did not grasp the human condition; he grasped the condition of 18th century France.¹⁴ Insofar as Marxism has been an attempt to realize Rousseau’s dream in historical contexts from which that dream is increasingly alienated, it has always already been in decline.

But Marxism does not need to be reduced to that. More fundamentally, Marxism is the idea that every human being can and ought to achieve the highest forms of consciousness possible for that human being. For most of human history, limits on consciousness have been imposed by the needs of the economic system and of the state that maintains that system. By going through capitalism, we generate the possibility of overcoming those limits. Crucially, we not only generate a possibility of overcoming the limits, but also discover that in many cases people can do more than we thought they could do. We overcome

our tendency to naturalize and reify what we see before us. We even realize that what we thought was the highest form of consciousness, the highest kind of freedom, was itself a misapprehension of what can be done.¹⁵

On Bonapartism

Too many Marxists have argued that insofar as we have capitalism, we are in the same situation as those who lived under capitalism before us. We need to pay more attention to the kind of state we have, to the possibilities that state opens and those it forecloses. The modern bourgeois nation-state is a problem in its own right. Marxists have often pointed out that the form the state currently takes blocks things other people try to do, but they are reluctant to heed this advice themselves.

This is largely because of a thought taboo created by the role the concept of Bonapartism has historically played in Marxist thought. If you think that society is meant to overcome the state, and then the state is meant to wither away, the state can only be preserved if the revolution has been incomplete. In this conceptual scheme, a person who argues that the state remains necessary has made an objective concession to the Right. They have argued for, at the very least, a “retreat.”

In the 20th century, the scale of the revolutionary task became enormous. The party organized society, but the modern state consolidated even faster. It proliferated mediators, and these mediators subverted social organizations and turned them against themselves and one another. It was the presence of these mediators that induced Althusser to speak of “ideological state apparatuses.” But in thinking of the state as unitary and implacable, he failed to grasp the internal divisions that were already being born within it.



Abraham Bosse, frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651)

This is not to say that Bonapartism is an entirely outmoded concept. There are many kinds of states that restrain consciousness, and we do need to identify them and avoid replicating or reinventing them. But today, states rarely operate in the orthodox Bonapartist way, i.e., by putting generals in between the workers and the capitalists. Instead, they operate by proliferating confusing forms of mediation. The critical difference between these total states and the Bonapartist state is that the latter rests on a contingent class compromise that is highly visible and, given the alternatives, relatively easy to grasp. Fully-fledged modern states operate in a confused way, in a way that befuddles even their operators.

This lack of consciousness can be used to turn the modern state against itself. Rather than try in vain to unite society or to wield the modern state’s hypothetical capacities ourselves, we can exacerbate the impasses to the point of implosion.

While we cannot unite society for a confrontation with the state, we can create “perches” in the detritus of modern society. From these perches, we can study the state, grasp the dynamics of its malaise, formulate alternative political forms, and find ways to use the malaise to move toward the alternative forms. These alternative forms must unlock consciousness. Ideally, they should create conditions under which the working class can be reawakened. But this may not involve going straight to the end all in one go. There may be a series of political forms that are necessary. If we make better kinds of polities, future generations born into future polities will grasp things that we do not grasp. We do not, therefore, need to solve the whole problem ourselves. We need only make a start.

The universities are gradually losing their capacity to function as perches. We will need new social organizations that can perform this role. These organizations may provide a pedagogical function, they may offer advice to state actors, they may dress themselves up as non-political organizations dedicated to religious asceticism or to historical preservation. But above all else, they are perches from which to observe the modern state, to look for opportunities to turn it against itself for the purposes of transforming it into some superior political form.

The special task

In antiquity, it was rarely assumed that states fetter consciousness. On the contrary, it was often argued that a well-ordered state created the conditions necessary for consciousness. Aristotle describes the possibility of a highly conscious, cooperative society, but this cooperation is made possible by the state:

individuals while owning their property privately put their own possessions at the service of their friends and make use of their friends’ possessions as common property; for instance in Sparta people use one another’s slaves as virtually their own, as well as horses and hounds, and also use the produce in the fields throughout the country if they need provisions on a journey. It is clear therefore that it is better for possessions to be privately owned, but to make them common property in use; and to *train the citizens to this is the special task of the legislator*.¹⁶

Please do not read this as an exhortation to rebuild the polis. I do not stand before you espousing the politics of Nietzsche or Arendt. My aim here is to get you to think about how we can use the state to do Marxism, to expand consciousness, to overcome the structural domination of capital, today, in our circumstances. The purpose of raising Aristotle is to shake you out of a set of modernist assumptions that have become a straightjacket. It is not to make a scholastic out of you.

As we think about this, it will be helpful to keep in mind that there may be more causes of conflict among people than we would like to think. While scarcity and competition have, historically, played an enormously important role in causing us to kill each other, Hobbes does point to another problem. This is the problem of “diffidence” and it stems from the separation of persons. Because you and I inhabit separate bodies, I do not have direct access to your consciousness, nor you to mine. To communicate with you, I must use words, like the ones I’m using here. There are several ways we can make a mess of this together:

1. I can lie to you; I can deliberately misrepresent what is in my mind.
2. I can be inarticulate; I can try earnestly to express myself, but fail to get my point across.
3. You can misunderstand me; you can be uncharitable and mischaracterize my position.

And of course, we can do two or even all three of these things at the same time. In fact, doing all three is not the exception — it’s the rule. Words are mediators, they are ways of trying to create an illusion that a gap in material reality can be bridged. When we are conscious of their

role, we choose them carefully, and perhaps it is possible that one day we will achieve a level of consciousness that allows us to rule ourselves with words alone. But people get lost in mediation. They reify and naturalize their terms. They choose their words poorly, and their misunderstandings lead to conflict. These conflicts are especially sharp when we disagree about the meanings of the terms that gesture at that which is most precious to us — words like “God,” “Good,” “Truth,” or “Freedom.”

The modern state is a realm of mediation and thus one of confusion. It is a context in which words do not unite society, they create ever more numerous forms of conflict. But if some number of us can nonetheless grasp what is going on, we will have an advantage over the elites themselves, who are now completely lost in a maze of their own making. Instead of denying the confusion or waiting for the confusion to subside, we can tarry with it.

You need peace to think. Hobbes, in trying to come up with a political solution to the English Civil War, tried to create peace — he tried to help you think. He took the task of political theory seriously. The nation-state he helped to fashion has run its course. Now we must take up the special task once more, the task that belonged to John Adams, that drove him to write these lines:

The science of government it is my duty to study, more than all other Sciences; the Art of Legislation and Administration and Negotiation, ought to take Place, indeed to exclude in a manner all other Arts. I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce and Agriculture in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry and Porcelain.¹⁷

IP

¹ On January 25–27, 2024, the Platypus Affiliated Society hosted its sixth annual European Conference in Berlin. See the panel “The legacy of Lenin” (January 27, 2024), available online at <<https://www.youtube.com/live/FoX0unyoPX4>>.

² Fine, I’ll tell you — the book you’re looking for is *Polyarchy: Participation and Opposition* (1971).

³ I use the term “traditionally” to deliberately suggest modernity has ossified into a tradition.

⁴ If you need help, read Alexis de Tocqueville’s *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856).

⁵ See the scene in the film *The Return of the King* (2003), where Frodo and Sam turn a corner and see the Eye of Sauron: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fkA19EzY8g&t=142s>>.

⁶ People often read *The Lord of the Rings* in a conservative way, but c’mon, man — the Hobbits are bourgeois in the extreme. In the film *The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001), see Bilbo’s description of Hobbits: <<https://youtu.be/-PcUnqIPAB8A>>; Frodo saying, “our business is our own”: <<https://youtu.be/WmghV5AimjU>>; Bilbo explaining why he took Frodo in: <https://youtu.be/Qig0_OPbFY>; and the routine of breakfast, second breakfast, elevenses, luncheon, dinner, and supper: <<https://youtu.be/gA8LV37QwxA>>.

⁷ Perhaps this has something to do with the reason Plato suggests tyranny is the regime that immediately precedes the wiping of the slate.

⁸ [French] “I am the state”; literally, “the state, that’s me.”

⁹ See Sonya Vatomsky, “When Societies Put Animals on Trial,” *JSTOR Daily*, September 13, 2017, available online at <<https://daily.jstor.org/when-societies-put-animals-on-trial/>>.

¹⁰ There is an episode of my films podcast *The Lack on The Devils*: “The Devils and Repression” (May 20, 2021), available online at <<https://thelack.podbean.com/e/the-devils-and-repression/>>.

¹¹ *The Devils* is based on real events. As far as we understand what happened, the priest was indeed killed as part of a political plot by the cardinal.

¹² In the *Republic*, there are three kinds of souls, but in the *Phaedrus*, there are nine. The number is different because the typology of souls is not a dogma, but a metaphor. Its purpose is pedagogical; Plato wrote the dialogues to persuade you that thinking is cool and you should do it if you can.

¹³ After this come the athletes and the medical doctors, who are concerned with the whole body, but not the soul. Then you have priests of the mysteries and the poets, who delight the senses, but not the whole body. Then you have poets and imitative artists, who focus more narrowly on specific senses. Then you have manual laborers and farmers, who satisfy specific appetites and physical needs. Then the sophists and demagogues, who deliberately create confusion in others, and finally the tyrants, who are themselves the most confused and the least happy.

¹⁴ Or perhaps 18th century Geneva, depending on who you ask.

¹⁵ Market socialists fail to grasp the degree to which markets fetter consciousness. The merchant is a long way from the philosopher, and a philosopher who must sell philosophy the way a merchant sells socks will find that in due course, the pitch degrades the product. But this is a digression — we’ll pick it back up again some other time.

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, book II, section 1263a, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944), 87–89, emphasis added, available online at <<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:abot.tlg.0086.035.2>>.

¹⁷ John Adams to Abigail Adams (May 12, 1780), available online at <<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/04-03-02-0258>>.

In modern, that is to say, bourgeois society, it is understood that the law does not make society but society makes the law. Society does not serve the state, but the state serves society.

The U.S. is not a democracy — not like Ancient Athens, in which the state was society and society was the state — but a constitutional republic. Moreover, the Constitution is interpreted according to the principles of the Declaration of Independence — according to the principles of the American Revolution.²

It is not democracy because it is not the rule of the people but rather the rule of law. And the rule of law is not identical with the rule of society. There are civil rights, meaning, the rights of civil society against the state — and against the laws the state enforces.

These rights are inalienable. You can never lose your rights but only have them abrogated — violated. And these rights are not only for citizens, but are human rights: they apply to everyone where the U.S. Constitution can hold sway. — The U.S. is not a nation-state, because the principles of the Declaration of Independence and U.S. Constitution are understood to apply everywhere and to everyone — at least where feasible: the scope and reach of the Revolution.

The U.S. Constitutional order and system is revolutionary. It is expansive and ever-deepening. We continue to recognize and explore the full dimensions of rights — of freedom. This is not a local but a world-wide phenomenon. The Revolution has the power to protect all escaped slaves on its free soil — and beyond.

Do we still believe it? People around the world do. Perhaps some haven’t heard it yet — that somewhere they have been recognized as free.

Citizen Trump is trying to go back to Washington. Who is trying to stop him? Certainly not the people. Or at least not all of them. Perhaps not even a majority.

Liberal democracy means — unlike Ancient democracy — recognizing and protecting the rights of minorities against the majority — not least why there are civil rights against the law voted by the majority. And this includes a minority of one. A single person with whom no one agrees nonetheless has rights against everyone else. — Do we still believe it?

Capitalism demands that we surrender our rights to the needs not of society but of capital. But we are liable to misrecognize the needs of capital as those of society. And of course they are: the needs of an alienated society. When we think we are serving the needs of society we are inevitably always serving the needs of capital. We surrender our rights to the needs not of society but of capital. Always.

Marx recognized long ago that socialism is capitalism — capitalism is socialism. Socialism is not freedom but its alienated projection: a projection of capitalism. Capitalism is alienated society and socialism is a projection of that alienation. This includes political alienation, which becomes a mystification of the law and state, their reification and hypostatization — ironically, since the bourgeois revolution had secularized law and the state and removed them from the domain of divine justification and religious authority, bringing them within

the realm of consciousness of society in history. That consciousness has withered.

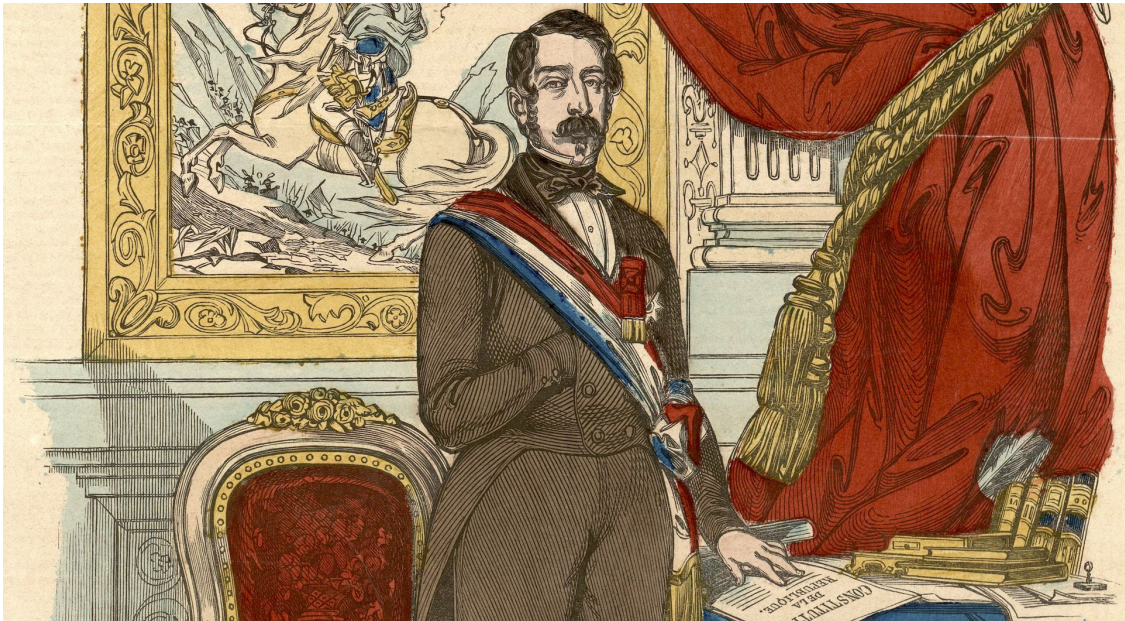
Marx critiqued socialism as an alienated misrecognition of the content of freedom, in which it appears as either anarchy or totalitarian statism: as pure irrationalism or pure rationalism. But as usual for the Marxist dialectic, it is both and neither.

Socialism was meant to work through this crisis of bourgeois emancipation and its political form of liberal democracy in capitalism, not negate it in either libertarianism or totalitarian democracy.

Classical liberal thought is usually associated with the so-called “minimal state,” but this is misleading. In the conception of the U.S. Constitutional order envisaged by the Founders — the American Revolutionaries — the tyranny of the state was not merely counterposed to the freedom of society, but the different elements of state power were counterbalanced against each other as opposed tyrannies: the tyranny of law; the tyranny of judicial judgment; and the tyranny of executive action. Each was a dictatorship checking and balancing the others: a legislative dictatorship; judicial dictatorship; and executive dictatorship.

It is the third of these that concerns us here, regarding Trump. Trump stands accused of abusing power and wanting to establish dictatorship. But against this the dictatorial powers of the law and the state enforcement of it are being mobilized against his candidacy for reelection to the Presidency. In so doing, Trump’s opponents are threatening the authority and power of the executive embodied in the Presidency as such. The President is an elected monarch — an elected dictator. This is especially so in capitalism which brings out the necessity of dictatorial methods especially prominently, turning it from a rare occasion of emergency into the normal exercise in managing the rolling crises of capital. Marx called this the “Bonapartism” of the capitalist state, as distinct from its earlier, pre-Industrial Revolution bourgeois form. This is seen in the rise of a permanent police force and prisons, both of which are inventions of the industrial era, to control the proletariat. From the subsequent Progressive era, we get a “fourth branch of government,” namely the permanent bureaucracy of the administrative state. It is the dictatorship of this Deep State that has conflicted with that of the elected Presidency. This has raised the issue of civilian government per se. Trump represents elected civilian authority over the state where they clash.

Trump claims Presidential immunity from criminal prosecution — the Lockean executive prerogative to break the law in order to preserve it. There is already legislative (parliamentary) and judicial immunity, to prevent abusive exercise of the law by the executive — which in Locke’s moment was that of the hereditary monarchy and its appointed Majesty’s deputies (including judges). What is usually overlooked is the need to prevent the reverse, the legislative (and judicial) abuse of the executive function of government. There is indeed a Deep State of permanent bureaucratic “special bodies of armed



François Georgin, "Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte, représentant du peuple, Président de la République française" (1849) [detail]

men” in the state of capitalism, which has sought to escape political responsibility to the civilian authority of elected office in the Presidency. Trump was targeted by the Deep State as well as by his political adversaries (Democrats and Republicans) from the beginning of his candidacy.

The Unitary Executive Theory raised in response to the Nixon-era reforms curtailing Presidential authority and power is both legally and politically correct: that without untrammelled executive power, there is tyranny. The bureaucratic administrative changes made after Watergate, establishing independence of federal law enforcement from the Presidency at the dawn of the neoliberal era were long in the making, and blind or indifferent to the fatal compromise of politics involved in it. Nixon was ousted by the CIA and FBI — as they’ve now tried to do with Trump. It is not surprising that along with Trump and the crisis of the electoral political parties manifesting at the end of neoliberalism, the problematic rationale of these post-Nixon changes is surfacing again now. Nixon said he thought that if the President did it, it wasn’t illegal. He might have been right about that. He resigned to avoid impeachment — which is importantly a political and not legal process, conducted by elected politicians not career prosecutors and law enforcement officers. The post-Watergate reforms removed the Deep State in the executive branch of federal government from elected political civilian authority.

Trump maintains that the decision of his case will affect not only his own fate, but that of the U.S. Presidency as such. This is simply true. Should the President become a mere figurehead for the permanent Deep State? Are Presidential initiatives merely suggestions to the bureaucracy? Congress has set up unelected bureaucratic executive agencies whose decisions have the force of law. Is the Presidential election merely a rallying-point for down-ballot candidates to Congress? Is there only to be legislation and lawfare in the courts, and no longer any executive prerogative by electoral mandate? The Presidency is the only office chosen by the entire electorate — however mediated by the federal state system, still, the President is the only nationally elected politician. This is what makes him dangerous.

Trump is wrongly accused not because he didn’t do what they say, but because his prosecution is wrongly motivated, and is intended to abrogate liberal democracy in a very pointed way: by violating the personal rights of an individual and denying the collective political rights of democracy.

Marx declared the goal of communism to be a situation where the “freedom of each is the precondition for the freedom of all.” This was no utopian goal but an existing value already in bourgeois society, however violated by capitalism, but still to be aspired as a task in getting beyond it. It was a principle to be observed in practice — so that its compromise could be recognized as a problem in the here and now, not to be accepted in its apparent but false necessity in capitalism. Socialism was to realize this.

But the pseudo-“Left” has long fallen into the antinomy of individualism vs. collectivism in capitalist contradiction, and has taken on the latter value as its own — abandoning personal liberty to the avowed Right. However, conservative collectivism also belongs to the Right, demanding the sacrifice of the individual. We should not agree to this demand, and certainly not in the name of “social justice.”

The fact that Trump appears politically as both a private person only selfishly motivated and a public menace unleashing the demons of popular fury is indicative of the contradiction that liberal democracy presents in capitalism. He thus perfectly embodies the issue. That he is an unremarkably moderate conservative Centrist in his policies and politics only emphasizes this fact: Citizen Trump is the problem.

The threat of “fascism” — the specter of Ancient democracy and tribal republicanism — has haunted the capitalist world from the inception of its crisis. After long crying wolf at

Trump, finally on January 6, 2021, Trump seemed to confirm the worst fears by summoning a mob to riot at the Capitol to delay or prevent certification of his electoral defeat — to “stop the steal.” Perhaps, as Nixon said in 1960, “they stole it fair and square,” and so there’s no point in challenging it. But the man has a right to speak, however demagogically, and the people have a right to protest against their government at its public buildings, whose physical structures and political procedures after all belong to them — and no one but them. They belong to us.

Trump’s election was protested by Democrats, so why is protesting Biden’s election forbidden?

The Democrats and established Republicans sought to delegitimize Trump’s election, and Trump returned the favor. Evidently his most prized classified documents were those that showed his innocence of the Russia collusion hoax manufactured against him by the Democrats and Deep State.

In this sense, we have the historic right and obligation, the duty as a society, to experience politically the phenomenon of Trump, for it shows all the weak and blind spots of liberal democracy in capitalism. As Tocqueville said ironically of American democracy, the public receives the government it deserves: as a society we also get the public we deserve. Trump demands that we confront the problem of politics this society has produced in capitalism. But Trump is — by far — not the worst example of it.

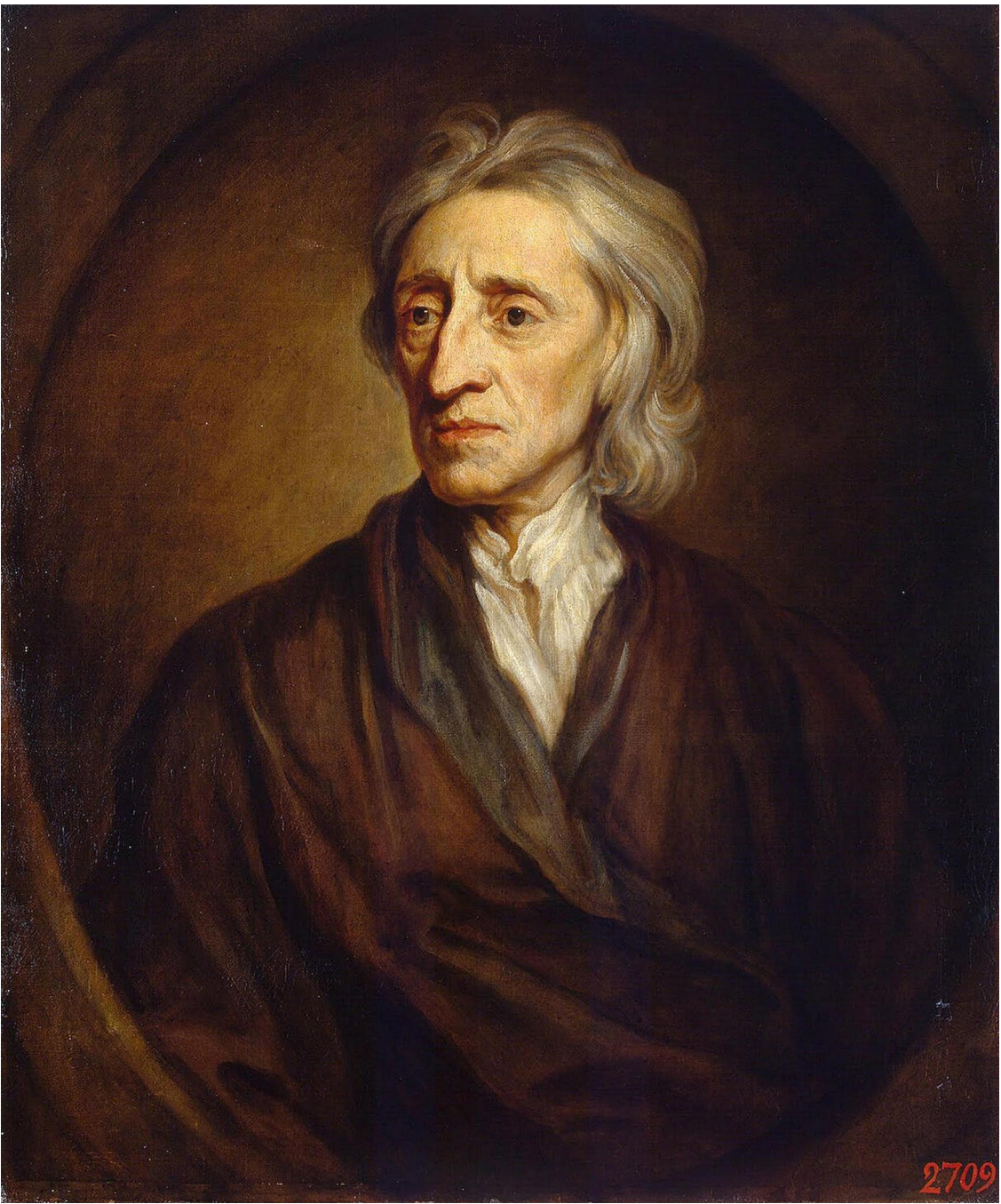
As I wrote more than eight years ago, when Trump first appeared on the political stage, the crisis of neoliberalism has been a crisis of its politics, and this takes the form of a crisis of liberal democracy, specifically of its political parties. All the anxious talk about “populism” betrays this fact.

In Ancient Rome, every election was attended by gang warfare and blood on the streets spilled by the competing factions. Candidates were assassinated, and elections triggered civil wars — as in capitalism. Every election was a political revolution. This is still the case, and it shows. The bug is a feature; the glitch is the algorithm; the noise is the music — of democracy. It is a *Gesamtkunstwerk* — but not necessarily a *Götterdämmerung*.³ Especially in the U.S., which is a continuation of the original American Revolution. Vivek Ramaswamy called for reinvigorating the spirit of 1776: he sees that in Trump.

The answer proposed by Trump’s traumatized opponents is to suspend rights and avoid election: to cancel liberalism and democracy; to ban the opera and imprison its diva. This is no exaggeration. They have done and will do everything they possibly can to try preventing Trump’s election and taking office, in a most remarkable series of events in the history of the U.S. Neither Trump and his supporters nor his opponents are wrong in saying that the fate of American democracy is on the line. The only question is what this says and what it means. Are we afraid to learn? We have yet to figure it out.

Trump and Trumpism are not going away, whatever we might wish. The task of politics remains — even and perhaps especially in the crisis of capitalist politics. It points the way to socialist politics, from the very heart of liberal democracy in crisis. Without a political party for socialism, this is the — very best — politics capitalism has to offer. Are we afraid of it?

So, I repeat the question, for the third time,⁴ now: why not Trump — again? **IP**



Godfrey Kneller, "Portrait of John Locke" (1697)

¹ Video of the panel is available online at <<https://youtu.be/ulayk1nqMRU>>.

² See Chris Cutrone, “The American Revolution and the Left,” *Platypus Review* 124 (March 2020), in *The Death of the Millennial Left* (Sublation, 2023), available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2020/03/01/the-american-revolution-and-the-left/>>.

³ [German] “Total artwork” and “twilight of the gods.”

⁴ See Chris Cutrone, “Why not Trump?,” *Platypus Review* 89 (September 2016) and “Why not Trump again?,” *Platypus Review* 123 (February 2020), in *The Death of the Millennial Left*, available online at <<https://platypus1917.org/2016/09/06/why-not-trump/>> and <<https://platypus1917.org/2020/02/01/why-not-trump-again/>>.